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Editorial

Another CIA Blunder?

Whenever the Central Intelligence Agency breaks into the news, the results are apt to be embarrassing to the U.S.

That's because the CIA, to put it bluntly, is a spy agency whose work sees the light of day only when there has been a blunder somewhere.

The latest example, which has caused some red faces in the State Department, further damaged U.S. prestige in Southeast Asia, and brought a demand by a congressional committee for an investigation, actually is more than five years old and came to light only because the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, was piqued.

What happened, according to Lee's story, was that early in 1960 a CIA agent was caught trying to buy information from Singapore secret agents. Then the U.S. State Department allegedly offered Lee a \$3-million bribe not to reveal the arrest of the CIA man.

Ordinarily, that tale would be dismissed as fantastic. But Lee mentioned the incident the other day in reciting a list of grievances against the U.S. The State Department promptly branded the story as false, and then the fat was in the fire.

For Lee had what appeared to be documentary evidence to support his tale. He produced a letter sent to him early in 1961 by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, apologizing for improper activities by CIA agents and promising disciplinary action.

Confronted with that information, the State Department spokesman who had uttered the denial had to reverse himself and say "those who were consulted yesterday

were not fully aware of the background of the incident, which occurred 4½ years ago."

It is not difficult to perceive how the State Department happened to trip itself up. The alleged bribe attempt presumably was made during the closing months of the Eisenhower administration, and Secretary Rusk's apology was more or less a disclaimer of responsibility for the acts of the previous regime.

And the initial denial by the State Department spokesman was on the assumption that the charge was leveled against the Rusk organization. That was the background of which he was "not fully aware."

The whole shabby business, however, serves to point up again the strange and unique character of the Central Intelligence Agency in the U.S. government.

Congress knows little or nothing of the CIA's operations. It doesn't even know how it spends its money. There is no separate budget for the CIA, its funds being lumped under those appropriated for the executive branch of the government.

Probably it has to be that way. Espionage is not an operation that can be performed in the public view. The CIA is the one activity of the federal government that has to be taken strictly on faith.

Unfortunately, there have been too many instances lately where that faith has tottered. The part that the CIA played in the Bay of Pigs fiasco is dubious, to say the least, nor did it win any medals in the Dominican Republic, nor in its activities with the various regimes in South Viet Nam.

Maybe the CIA can't operate in the spotlight. But there should be some prescription for dealing with its blunders.